

CHAPTER 1

Freedom, reason and nature



I. Expression and freedom

Hegel's philosophical synthesis took up and combined two trends of thought and sensibility which arose in his day and are still of fundamental importance in our civilization. To see why Hegel's thought remains of perennial interest we could perhaps best start by identifying these trends and recognizing their unbroken continuity into our time.

Both were reactions in late-eighteenth-century Germany to the mainstream of Enlightenment thought, in particular its French variant, and became important sources of what we know as Romanticism.

The first, which I would like to call 'expressivism',¹ arises with the diffuse movement we know as the *Sturm und Drang*, although it continues well beyond its demise. Its most impressive early formulation comes in the work of Herder.

In a way this can be seen as a protest against the mainstream Enlightenment view of man – as both subject and object of an objectifying scientific analysis. The focus of objection was against a view of man as the subject of egoistic desires, for which nature and society provided merely the means to fulfilment. It was a philosophy which was utilitarian in its ethical outlook, atomistic in its social philosophy, analytic in its science of man, and which looked to a scientific social engineering to reorganize man and society and bring men happiness through perfect mutual adjustment.

Against this, Herder and others developed an alternative notion of man whose dominant image was rather that of an expressive object. Human life was seen as having a unity rather analogous to that of a work of art, where every part or aspect only found its proper meaning in relation to all the others. Human life unfolded from some central core – a guiding theme or inspiration – or should do so, if it were not so often blocked and distorted.

1 A term derived from Isaiah Berlin's 'expressionism'; cf. 'Herder and the Enlightenment' in Earl Wasserman (ed.), *Aspects of the Eighteenth Century*, Baltimore, 1965.

From this point of view the Enlightenment analytic science of man was not only a travesty of human self-understanding, but one of the most grievous modes of self-distortion. To see a human being as in some way compounded of different elements: faculties of reason and sensibility, or soul and body, or reason and feeling, was to lose sight of the living, expressive unity; and in so far as men tried to live according to these dichotomies, they must suppress, mutilate or severely distort that unified expression which they have it in them to realize.

But this science not only cut into the unity of human life, it also isolated the individual from society, and cut men off from nature. For the image of expression was central to this view not just in that it provided the model for the unity of human life, but also in that men reached their highest fulfilment in expressive activity. It is in this period that art came to be considered for the first time the highest human activity and fulfilment, a conception which has had a large part in the making of contemporary civilization. These two references to the expressive model were linked: it is just because men were seen as reaching their highest realization in expressive activity that their lives could themselves be seen as expressive unities.

But men are expressive beings in virtue of belonging to a culture; and a culture is sustained, nourished and handed down in a community. The community has itself on its own level an expressive unity. It is once more a travesty and a distortion to see it as simply an instrument which individuals set up (or ought ideally to set up) to fulfil their individual goals, as it was for the atomist and utilitarian strand of the Enlightenment.

On the contrary, the *Volk* as Herder describes it is the bearer of a certain culture which sustains its members; they can isolate themselves only at the cost of great impoverishment. We are here at the point of origin of modern nationalism. Herder thought that each people had its own peculiar guiding theme or manner of expression, unique and irreplaceable, which should never be suppressed and which could never simply be replaced by any attempt to ape the manners of others (as many educated Germans tried to ape French *philosophes*).

This was perhaps the most remarkably innovative aspect of the expressionist conception. In a way it appears as a throw-back, beyond the analytic, atomistic thought of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, to the unity of Aristotelian form, a unity which unfolds as human life develops. But one of the important innovations which come with the image of expression is the idea that each culture, and within it each individual as well, has its own 'form' to realize, and that no other can replace it or substitute for it,

or discover the thread which guides it. Herder is in this way not just the founder of modern nationalism, but also of one of the main bulwarks against its excesses, modern expressive individualism.

Expressivism also sharply broke with the earlier Enlightenment on its notion of man's relation to nature. Man is not body and mind compounded but an expressive unity englobing both. But since man as a bodily being is in interchange with the whole universe, this interchange must itself be seen in expressive terms. Hence to see nature just as a set of objects of potential human use is to blind ourselves and close ourselves to the greater current of life which flows through us and of which we are a part. As an expressive being, man has to recover communion with nature, one which had been broken and mutilated by the analytic, desiccating stance of objectifying science.

This is one important trend which arises in the late eighteenth century in reaction to the main thrust of the French Enlightenment. But there is another, which has at first sight a quite opposite bent. It was a powerful reaction against the radical objectification of Enlightenment thought, but this time against the objectifying of human nature and in the name of moral freedom.

If man was to be treated as another piece of objectified nature, whether in introspection or external observation, then his motivation would have to be explained causally like all other events. Those who accepted this view argued that this was not incompatible with freedom, for was not one free in being motivated by one's own desire, however caused?

But from the standpoint of a more radical view of freedom, this was unacceptable. Moral freedom must mean being able to decide against all inclination for the sake of the morally right. This more radical view of course rejected at the same time a utilitarian definition of morality; the morally right could not be determined by happiness and therefore by desire. Instead of being dispersed throughout his diverse desires and inclinations the morally free subject must be able to gather himself together, as it were, and make a decision about his total commitment.

Now the main figure in this revolution of radical freedom is without question Immanuel Kant. Rousseau in some ways foreshadowed the idea, but Kant's was the formulation, that of a giant among philosophers, which imposed itself, then and still today. In a philosophical work as powerful and as rich in detail as Kant's critical philosophy, the tracing of any single theme must involve over-simplification, but it is not too great a distortion to say that the definition of this radically free moral subjectivity was one of the main motivations of Kant's philosophy.

Kant sets out his notion of moral freedom in his second *Critique*. Morality is to be entirely separated from the motivation of happiness or pleasure. A moral imperative is categorical; it binds us unconditionally. But the objects of our happiness are all contingent; none of them can be the ground of such an unconditional obligation. This can only be found in the will itself, in something that binds us because of what we are, that is, rational wills, and for no other reason.

Hence Kant argues that the moral law must be binding *a priori*; and this means that it cannot depend on the particular nature of the objects we desire or the actions we project, but must be purely formal. A formally necessary law, that is, one whose contradictory is self-contradictory, is binding on a rational will. The argument that Kant uses here has been much disputed, and it appears rightly; the Kantian appeal to formal laws which would nevertheless give a determinate answer to the question of what we ought to do has always seemed a little like squaring the circle. But the exciting kernel of this moral philosophy, which has been immensely influential, is the radical notion of freedom. In being determined by a purely formal law, binding on me simply *qua* rational will, I declare my independence, as it were, from all natural considerations and motives and from the natural causality which rules them. 'Such independence, however, is called *freedom* in the strictest, i.e. transcendental, sense' (*Critique of Practical Reason*, bk I, sect. 5). I am free in a radical sense, self-determining not as a natural being, but as a pure, moral will.

This is the central, exhilarating notion of Kant's ethics. Moral life is equivalent to freedom, in this radical sense of self-determination by the moral will. This is called 'autonomy'. Any deviation from it, any determination of the will by some external consideration; some inclination, even of the most joyful benevolence; some authority, even as high as God himself, is condemned as heteronomy. The moral subject must act not only rightly, but from the right motive, and the right motive can only be respect for the moral law itself, that moral law which he gives to himself as rational will.

This vision of moral life excited not only the exhilaration of freedom, but also a changed sentiment of piety or religious awe. In fact, the object of this sentiment shifted. The numinous which inspired awe was not God as much as the moral law itself, the self-given command of Reason. So that men were thought to come closest to the divine, to what commands unconditional respect, not when they worship but when they act in moral freedom.

But this austere and exciting doctrine exacts a price. Freedom is defined in contrast to inclination, and it is plain that Kant sees the moral life as a

perpetual struggle, for man as a natural being must be dependent on nature, and hence have desires and inclinations which just because they depend on nature cannot be expected to dovetail with the demands of morality which have their utterly different source in pure reason (bk I, pt III, 149). But what is more, one has the uneasy sense that an ultimate peace between reason and inclination would be more of a loss than a gain; for what would become of freedom if there were no more contrast? Kant never really solved this problem, but he could avoid facing it the more easily in that he plainly believed that a state of holiness, as he called it, where the very possibility of a desire which would spur us to deviate from the moral law would no longer arise, was impossible in this vale of tears. He rather thought that we are faced with the endless task of struggling to approach perfection. But for his successors this became a point of acute tension. For they were strongly drawn both by Kant's radical freedom and by the expressive theory of man.

On reflection, this is not at all surprising; there were profound affinities between the two views. The expressive theory points us towards a fulfilment of man in freedom, which is precisely a freedom of self-determination, and not simply independence from external impingement. But the highest, purest, most uncompromising vision of self-determining freedom was Kant's. No wonder it turned the head of a whole generation. Fichte clearly poses the choice between two foundations for philosophy, one based on subjectivity and freedom, the other on objectivity and substance, and opts emphatically for the first. If man's fulfilment was to be that of a self-determining subject, and if subjectivity meant self-clarity, self-possession in reason, then the moral freedom to which Kant called us had to be seen as a summit.

But the lines of affinity run the other way too. Kantian freedom of self-determination called for completion; it must strive to overcome the boundaries in which it was set and become all-determining.

It cannot be satisfied with the limitations of an inner, spiritual freedom, but must try to impress its purpose on nature as well. It must become total. This is in any case how this seminal idea was experienced by the young generation which received Kant's critical writings in its formative period, and which was seized with enthusiasm for the idea, however older and wiser heads may have felt.

But along with this deep affinity between the two views which tended to draw the same people into their orbits, there was an obvious clash. Radical freedom seemed only possible at the cost of a diremption with nature, a division within myself between reason and sensibility more

radical than anything the materialist, utilitarian Enlightenment had dreamed, and hence a division with external nature, from whose causal laws the free self must be radically independent, even while phenomenally his behaviour appeared to conform. The radically free subject was thrown back on himself, and it seemed on his individual self, in opposition to nature and external authority, and on to a decision in which others could have no share.

For young, and some not so young, intellectual Germans of the 1790s these two ideas, expression and radical freedom, took on a tremendous force. It was born partly no doubt of the changes in German society which made the need for a new identity to be felt all the more pressingly. But the force was multiplied many times by the sense that the old order was breaking and a new one was being born which arose from the impact of the French Revolution. The fact that this Revolution began after the Terror to arouse ambivalent feelings or even hostility among its erstwhile admirers did nothing to still the sense of urgency. On the contrary, there was a sense that a great transformation was both necessary and possible and this aroused hopes which at other times would have seemed extravagant. It was felt that a great breakthrough was imminent, and if because of the situation in Germany and the turn taken by the French Revolution this hope soon deserted the political sphere, it was all the more intense in the sphere of culture and human consciousness. And if France was the homeland of political revolution, where else but in Germany could the great spiritual revolution be accomplished?

The hope was that men would come to unite the two ideals, radical freedom and the expressive fullness. Because of the affinities between them mentioned above, it was almost inevitable that if either were deeply and powerfully felt, the other would be as well. Members of the older generation could remain aloof from one or the other; thus Herder never warmed to the critical turn of Kant's thought; though the two had been close during Herder's time of study at Königsberg they became somewhat estranged in the 1780s. Herder saw in the transcendental exploration of Kant only another theory which divided the subject. Kant for his part was dismissive about Herder's philosophy of history, and seems to have felt little attraction to this powerful statement of the expressive theory.

But it was their successors, the generation of the 1790s to which Hegel belonged, who threw themselves into the task of uniting these two trends. This synthesis was the principal aim of the first Romantic generation of Fichte and Schelling, of the Schlegels, of Hölderlin, Novalis

and Schleiermacher; even of older men who were not properly Romantics at all, notably Schiller.

The terms of the synthesis were variously identified. For the young Friedrich Schlegel the task was to unite Goethe and Fichte, the former's poetry representing the highest in beauty and harmony, the latter's philosophy being the fullest statement of the freedom and sublimity of the self. Others, such as Schleiermacher and Schelling, talked of uniting Kant and Spinoza.

But one of the most common ways of stating the problem was in terms of history, as a problem of uniting the greatest in ancient and modern life. We find this in Schiller, Friedrich Schlegel, the young Hegel, Hölderlin and many others. The Greeks represented for many Germans of the late eighteenth century a paradigm of expressivist perfection. This is what helps to explain the immense enthusiasm for ancient Greece which reigned in Germany in the generation which followed Winckelmann. Ancient Greece had supposedly achieved the most perfect unity between nature and the highest human expressive form. To be human came naturally, as it were. But this beautiful unity died. And moreover, it had to, for this was the price of the development of reason to that higher stage of self-clarity which is essential to our realization as radically free beings. As Schiller put it (*Aesthetic Education of Man*, 6th letter, para. 11), the 'intellect was unavoidably compelled ... to dissociate itself from feeling and intuition in an attempt to arrive at exact discursive understanding', and below (para. 12), 'If the manifold potentialities in man were ever to be developed, there was no other way but to pit them against each other.'

In other words the beautiful Greek synthesis had to die because man had to be inwardly divided in order to grow. In particular the growth of reason and hence radical freedom required a diremption from the natural and sensible. Modern man had to be at war with himself. The sense that the perfection of the expressive model was not enough, that it would have to be united with radical freedom, was clearly marked in this picture of history by the realization that the loss of primal unity was inevitable and that return was impossible. The overpowering nostalgia for the lost beauty of Greece was kept from ever overflowing its bounds into a project of return.

The sacrifice had been necessary to develop man to his fullest self-consciousness and free self-determination. But although there was no hope of return, there was hope, once man had fully developed his reason and his faculties, of a higher synthesis in which both harmonious unity and full self-consciousness would be united. If the early Greek synthesis

had been unreflective – and had to be, for reflection starts by dividing man within himself – then the new unity would fully incorporate the reflective consciousness gained, would indeed be brought about by this reflective consciousness. In the *Hyperion Fragment*, Hölderlin put it thus:

There are two ideals of our existence: one is a condition of the greatest simplicity, where our needs accord with each other, with our powers and with everything we are related to, *just through the organization of nature*, without any action on our part. The other is a condition of the highest cultivation, where this accord would come about between infinitely diversified and strengthened needs and powers, *through the organization which we are able to give to ourselves*.

Man is called on to tread a path from the first of these conditions to the second.

This spiral vision of history, where we return not to our starting point but to a higher variant of unity, expressed at once the sense of opposition between the two ideals and the demand, flaming up to a hope, that the two be united. The prime tasks of thought and sensibility were seen as the overcoming of profound oppositions which had been necessary, but which now had to be surmounted. These were the oppositions which expressed most acutely the division between the two ideals of radical freedom and integral expression.

These were: the opposition between thought, reason and morality on one side, and desire and sensibility on the other; the opposition between the fullest self-conscious freedom on one side, and life in the community on the other; the opposition between self-consciousness and communion with nature; and beyond this the separation of finite subjectivity from the infinite life that flowed through nature, the barrier between the Kantian subject and the Spinozist substance.

How was this great reunification to be accomplished? How to combine the greatest moral autonomy with a fully restored communion with the great current of life within us and without? In the end, this goal is only attainable if we conceive of nature itself as having some sort of foundation in spirit. If the highest spiritual side of man, his moral freedom, is to come to more than passing and accidental harmony with his natural being, then nature itself has to tend to the spiritual.

As long as we think of nature in terms of blind forces or brute facts then it can never fuse with the rational, the autonomous in man. We must either choose capitulation, with naturalism, or content ourselves with an occasional, partial accord within ourselves, won by unremitting effort and

constantly threatened by the massive presence of untransformed nature around us with which we are in constant, unavoidable interchange. If the aspirations to radical freedom and to integral expressive unity with nature are to be totally fulfilled together, if man is to be at one with nature in himself and in the cosmos while being most fully a self-determining subject, then it is necessary first that my basic natural inclination spontaneously be to morality and freedom; and more than this, since I am a dependent part of a larger order of nature, it is necessary that this whole order within me and without tend of itself towards spiritual goals, tend to realize a form in which it can unite with subjective freedom. If I am to remain a spiritual being and yet not be opposed to nature in my interchange with it, then this interchange must be a communion in which I enter into relation with some spiritual being or force.

But this is to say that spirituality, tending to realize spiritual goals, is of the essence of nature. Underlying natural reality is a spiritual principle striving to realize itself.

Now to posit a spiritual principle underlying nature comes close to positing a cosmic subject. And this becomes the foundation of a variety of the Romantic world-views, some of which came to expression in the evolving thought of the young Schelling.

But the mere positing of a cosmic subjectivity is not enough. Various pantheistic views, for instance, see the world as emanating from a spirit or soul. But pantheism cannot provide the basis for uniting autonomy and expressive unity.

For man is only an infinitesimal part of the divine life which flows through the whole of nature. Communion with the God of nature could only mean yielding to the great current of life and abandoning radical autonomy. Hence the view of this generation, which it drew from Herder and Goethe, was not a simple pantheism but rather a variant of the Renaissance idea of man the microcosm. Man is not merely a part of the universe; in another way he reflects the whole: the spirit which expresses itself in the external reality of nature comes to conscious expression in man. This was the basis of Schelling's early philosophy, whose principle was that the creative life of nature and the creative power of thought were one.² Hence, as Hoffmeister points out, the two basic ideas which we see recurring in different forms from Goethe to the Romantics to Hegel: that we can really know nature only because we are of the same substance, that

2 J. Hoffmeister, *Goethe und der deutsche Idealismus* (Leipzig, 1932), 10.

indeed we only properly know nature when we try to commune with it, not when we try to dominate or dissect it in order to subject it to the categories of analytic understanding;³ and secondly, that we know nature because we are in a sense in contact with what made it, the spiritual force which expresses itself in nature.

But then what is our relation as finite spirits to this creative force which underlies all nature? What does it mean to say that it is one with the creative power of thought in us? Does it just mean that this is the power to reflect in consciousness the life which is already complete in nature? But then in what sense would this be compatible with radical freedom? Reason would not be an autonomous source of norms for us; rather our highest achievement would be to express faithfully a larger order to which we belong. If the aspiration to radical autonomy is to be saved, the microcosm idea has to be pushed further to the notion that human consciousness does not just reflect the order of nature but completes or perfects it. On this view, the cosmic spirit which unfolds in nature is striving to complete itself in conscious self-knowledge, and the locus of this self-consciousness is the mind of man.

Thus man does more than reflect a nature complete in itself; rather he is the vehicle whereby the cosmic spirit brings to completion a self-expression the first attempts at which lie before us in nature. Just as on the expressivist view man achieves his fulfilment in a form of life which is also an expression of self-awareness, so here the power underlying nature, as spirit, reaches its fullest expression in self-awareness. But this is not achieved in some transcendent realm beyond man. If it were, then union with the cosmic spirit would require that man subordinate his will to a higher being, that he accept heteronomy. Rather spirit reaches this self-awareness in man.

So that while nature tends to realize spirit, that is, self-consciousness, man as a conscious being tends towards a grasp of nature in which he will see it as spirit and as one with his own spirit. In this process men come to a new understanding of self: they see themselves not just as individual fragments of the universe, but rather as vehicles of cosmic spirit. And hence men can achieve at once the greatest unity with nature, that is, with

3 So Goethe: War nicht das Auge sonnenhaft,

Die Sonne könnt' es nie erblicken;
Lag nicht in uns des Gottes eigne Kraft,
Wie könnt' uns Göttliches entzücken?